

Five Components of Reading

Phonemic Awareness

Description

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds—phonemes—in spoken words. Phonemes are the smallest units comprising spoken language.

Phonemic awareness and phonological awareness are often used interchangeably, but they are different. Phonological awareness is a broad term that includes phonemic awareness but it is more encompassing. It refers to the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds at the word, syllable, and phoneme level. The five levels of phonological awareness, from the simplest to the most complex form, include rhyme and alliteration, sentence segmenting, syllables, onsets and rimes, and phonemes. Research indicates that the phoneme level of phonological awareness is the most critical for learning to read.

How Phonemic Awareness Supports a Comprehensive Reading Program

Phonemic awareness is important to reading because it improves children's word reading, comprehension, and spelling. Phonemic awareness instruction helps reading comprehension primarily through its influence on word reading. When children are able to rapidly and accurately read words, it frees them to focus their attention on the meaning of what they are reading. Children who have phonemic awareness understand that sounds and letters are related, and can therefore relate the sounds to letters as they spell words.

The primary difference between good and poor readers is phonological processing ability. Children who have phonemic awareness skills are likely to have an easier time learning to read and spell than children who have few or none of these skills (*Put Reading First*, p. 2). Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the two best predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of reading instruction. Phonemic awareness is a stronger predictor of reading success than socio-economic status (SES), IQ, and vocabulary.

Scientifically Based Reading Research Related to Phonemic Awareness

- Phonemic awareness can be taught and learned (*Put Reading First*, p. 5).
- Effective phonemic awareness instruction teaches children to notice, think about, and manipulate sounds in spoken language (*Put Reading First*, p. 5).
- Phonemic awareness instruction is most effective when it focuses on only one or two types of phoneme manipulation, rather than several types (*Put Reading First*, p. 7).
- Phonemic awareness instruction is most effective when children are taught to manipulate phonemes by using the letters of the alphabet (National Reading



Panel, pp. 2–41).

- Teaching one or two types of phoneme manipulation— specifically blending and segmenting phonemes in words—is likely to produce greater benefits to students’ reading than teaching several types of manipulation (*Put Reading First*, p. 8).
- Over the school year, phonemic awareness instruction should take no more than twenty hours (*Put Reading First*, p. 9).
- The amount of time spent on phonemic awareness instruction should depend upon the goals of instruction, how many different phonemic awareness skills are to be taught, whether letters are included, and how much or how little the learners already know about phonemic awareness when they begin (National Reading Panel, pp. 2–42).
- Phonemic awareness instruction is most effective with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children (National Reading Panel, pp. 2–24, 40).
- Especially in first grade and beyond, students need to be assessed before phonemic awareness instruction is given, to find out what their instructional needs are. It is the quality of instruction and the responsiveness of the instruction to the individuals in the classroom that should have greater consideration than the amount of time (Yopp & Yopp, 2000).
- Small-group instruction is more effective than large-group or individual instruction in helping students acquire phonemic awareness and learn to read (*Put Reading First*, p. 9).

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